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This written thesis stands adjacent to and in support of my painting practice. The body of water color drawings, oil paintings, and collages comprising *Composite of Consciousness* seeks to mine imagery from my subconscious in order to closely consider and draw connections with the absurdity of contemporary life. Within the “reality” of this painted world scale, perspective, anatomy and color are all malleable and do not prescribe to observational expectations. In the following pages I will venture to articulate the string of inquiry that has guided this artistic journey.

COMPOSITE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by

Kathryn C. Gordon

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

## APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Kathryn C. Gordon has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Mariam Stephan

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Heather Holian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jennifer Meanley

\_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara Campbell Thomas

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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Thank you to Karen and Gerry Gordon, to whom this thesis is dedicated. Your unwavering support has given me the courage to continually seek out new adventures.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

I consider myself a visual storyteller steeped in the language of painting. Growing up there was never a lack of stories perpetually drummed up about the day-to-day human interactions of a large Irish family. Those meetings around the kitchen table were as ritualistic as going to church, with everyone trying to find that feeling of connection despite our inherent individual sensibilities. At the time, I did not realize that the language I was building within the medium of oil paint could be an outlet for my voice and another way of trying to connect to others.

My stories are neither rational nor sensible, their beginnings are unpacked from dreams, giving me a glimmer of the creature that culture has created. My dreams permit me to recognize and validate the strangeness of life. The main challenge within my studio practice is not allowing the painting process to become hijacked or distracted by pragmatism. I am investigating how the more bizarre and surprising moments generated in our subconscious connect and intertwine with the absurdity of everyday life.

Most of the imagery in my work has been removed from its original context, therefore, I cannot address the content of a piece of work in reference to its original form. I must create a nonlinear narrative and a plurality within the story of the painting. I find that this notion of bringing together incongruous elements

allows me to sort and process visual information on a very personal level. The simultaneity of the “real” and one’s projection or sense of the “real” creates for me the cyclical notion of a world within a world. This duplication, fragmentation and instability directly relates to the precarious political and social environment that I believe society inhabits today. So, how do you tell a story that has many beginnings, several climaxes, and virtually no consistent or singularly thematic plot or conclusion?

I see my work in relation to the Surrealist movement in that I am using stream of consciousness and dreams as a springboard into the work. I also see the work in relation to the Dada movement because painterly collage is so central to my process and thinking. However, these comparisons begin to feel superficial when considering the strikingly different historical context in which these movements flourished, and the contemporary context in which I reside. Surrealism and Dada were in reaction to the atrocities of World War I, a time when reality was unrecognizable. Whereas, today, we must navigate experience through a lens mediated by technology; forced to take in a surplus of information that has no hierarchical structure, one in which the Syrian refugee crisis is given equal air time with the Kardashians.

My hope is that these paintings will tease the viewer, never allowing them to feel firmly grounded in a singular space, and that humor can be used as a tool to engage with the darker aspects of the human condition. Some of the visual structures that have been reoccurring themes throughout this work include, but

are not limited to: bodies of water, doors and windows, mirrors and reflective surfaces, as well as surface patterning on walls and floors. I have used these controlled visual elements to reassert the precariousness of the world that I am inventing. It is important to me that the world of the painting is never predetermined; it takes on meaning and form as it is created. I define edges within the work as a consequential creation, when two parts from separate psychological realities are pressed against one another. That collision changes both of the parts, pushing them to exist together simultaneously.

“Dangerous World for Soft Tissue” (Fig. 1)

The family couch has a daughter.  
They have hung her portrait on the wall,  
Slender and mobile she intends to see the world.  
Her image maybe present, but she is not.  
The whole world is present, but it is not.  
It is a façade, don't get stuck,  
Pack the box, the movers are coming.  
Right, left, right, left, patent, leather  
Their new owner has named them,  
But has yet to claim them.  
I refuse to relinquish my outboard motor.  
Go test the prop in the trash can,



But watch your fingers!  
Gerda doesn't knock, she just starts talking.  
The eggs are almost done.  
The wallpaper caught a tear,  
And the dog was curious,  
But the glue is poisonous.  
The child on his boogie board  
Aims his harpoon at the glowing bellies.  
Please don't put out the light!  
The layered cake dangling and flickering,  
Is slowly fading.  
The children have escaped.

## CHAPTER II

### SYNTHETIC POSSIBILITIES

I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams. –Shakespeare

Early in my graduate experience I realized that I needed to leave behind the familiar pasture of observational painting and catapult myself into a world of invention; where scale, perspective, anatomy and color are malleable and do not have to mimic the naturalistic world... to build a reality within paint that does not rely solely on observation, but on imagination. Recognizing my own artistic voice has been a deeply personal and singular journey which has involved paying close attention in the studio and letting the work guide its own evolution. During graduate school, I have had to closely consider my previous training, old habits, and formulas. Then confront, challenge, and make room in my studio for new lines of inquiry. I have found that there are infinite possibilities within my own work, which have been previously untapped, and which I will continue to rigorously pursue. These possibilities are imbedded in materiality and the translation of my many personal visual realities.

This overhaul of my painting practice started when I decided to invent imagery synthetically through watercolor drawings (Fig. 2). My painting education up until this point was rooted in what was immediately observable, but in order to

investigate the subconscious I had to reconsider what had become a default approach to viewing the world.

I like to think of my work as a composite of consciousness: the sweet spot in our mind that holds a multitude of images from every part of our existence. When images are generated from the insular space of the mind, many details disappear while others become crystal-clear. Therefore, the actual manipulation of the paint needs to closely consider both clarity and confusion, existing simultaneously. There is an immediacy to drawing with watercolor on a small scale that lends itself to the rapid-fire pace of memory and daydreaming. This practice of quick watercolor drawings in succession became a physical version of or download from the subconscious. The physicality and viscosity of working with watercolor began to deeply influence my approach to oil painting. By laying the canvases down horizontally, I was able to pool and pull the paint, adjusting the mediums to allow more spontaneity. This shift put paint handling adjacent to conceptual questioning, allowing my body to rewire the physical sensations of what it means to manifest an idea within paint.

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*Dream 2/3/15: The three tiered sterling silver cookie tray sits on two work horses in the middle of my parents' patched asphalt driveway. At first I thought I saw chickens laying eggs on the tray, but as I got closer I realized miniature porcupines with babies suckling their stomachs replaced what should have been cookies. I kept trying to pick them up, but kept accidentally dropping them.*

It was at this time when my mentor, Mariam Stephan, introduced me to the work of Neo Rauch whose paintings reference communist propaganda posters and children's fairytales. Finding the work of this artist was like meeting a long lost relative, I immediately felt a connection. As I began to dig through the oeuvre of Rauch, I found an intricate family tree of Leipzig painters, whose artistic tradition reaches back to Maxwell Beckmann.

In the years following World War II there was hegemony of abstraction in Western Art. In the United States, the influence of capitalism and consumerism spurred on an art world that was interested in the "individual". Abstract Expressionism, a movement caught up in the pursuit of gestural manifestations of the artist's internal state, took hold, becoming a machine that drowned out most other forms of painterly language. The word *academic* referring to figurative representational work was reduced to a slur. There were a few quiet exceptions. One of these exceptions is Alice Neel, a painter whose self-imposed isolation allowed her to produce psychologically acute portraits that documented the social and economic diversity of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American life. Neel is an outlier. Isolation can create freedom of thought from overwhelming fashionable influences. As a country, East Germany was isolated and through this its painting ideologically became an outlier. The Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain had acted as a cultural and political veil for East Germany, keeping abstraction out and communist propaganda in. The oppressive political environment produced adaptable painters who recognized the power of images in affecting the mindset

of the masses in both positive and negative ways. Despite the detrimental effects of Communism, the political bubble that was created allowed this movement of painting to take root and to prosper when all other forms of figurative painting were becoming extinct. Everything changed when the Iron Curtain fell and East Germany was opened to the influence of the rest of Europe. However, the effects of this historical moment continued to impact two generations of German artists thereafter.

Exposure to this work encouraged me in specific ways to take risks in the studio: to invent unlikely spatial relationships, to pair disparate elements, and to intensify color by limiting my palette. Their visual aesthetic combines desaturated broken tones with primary colors, environments that are a mash-up of concrete block buildings and crumbling Baroque inspired architecture, as well as figures that are graphic and dislocated from different time periods. These paintings may seem otherworldly to me, but then I am reminded that the art we make is a bi-product of the culture surrounding us, and maybe their reality and my reality are extraordinary depending on the viewer's geographic disposition.

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*Dream 2/16/15: I am in the entryway of the stadium and gladiators are being introduced. I am pushed forward when they announce, "PING-PONG GIRL!", and the crowd roars. As I look down I realize that I am wearing green plastic boots and a cape, waving a ping-pong paddle that makes light saber noises.*

When I woke up I realized that maybe we are each our own superheroes running around in synthetic leotards trying to protect our version of reality.

### CHAPTER III

#### COLLAGE AND CANNIBALISM

By re-moulding the reality we assume to be objective art releases to us, realities otherwise hidden.- Winterson

Twenty modest sized oil sketches lined the walls of my studio, John Maggio, a printmaking faculty, leaned his weight back onto one foot and crossed his arms as he said, "You know: parts of these paintings are really working, but none operates as a whole. I really think you ought to consider cannibalizing them." After our visit ended, I cut every last painting into its most essential parts and began tacking them straight onto the wall, allowing edges to overlap and new worlds to be created. I moved the parts around for a few hours then pulled them all down, walked them home, and spent the evening on the couch stitching them together, each one a new whole (Fig. 3). I refer to this work as "parts paintings" because every element is removed from its original context and renegotiated in both formal and psychological ways.

At this point, the can of worms, that is collage, exploded. I began making several iterations of every painting: shifting the palette, the time of day, and the perspective. Then I would promptly carve up the canvases and rethink the entire image, seaming them together with a running stitch and embroidery floss. The process of stitching became essential because of its impermanence, there was

the opportunity to cut the strings at any moment. This brought me as close to freedom as is possible, the removal of risk management, because everything can be stitched back together.

This investigation brought about the painting “Belly Lights” (Fig. 4) and “Pizza/Jack” (Fig.5). “Belly Lights” helped me to understand the ways in which patterning and light can serve as important companions to building spatial constructions. Logic dictates that these properties would wrap around form and indicate volume, but if the drawing of those elements is manipulated in an unnatural way then our orientation or perspective is called into question.

However, in “Pizza/Jack” I began to think about the physical composition hugging the edges of the collaged elements. This experiment showed me that I am interested in working within the confines of a rectilinear composition. For the moment, this painterly structure presents a welcomed challenge in the studio.

“Space Heater for Cicadas” (Fig. 6) allowed me to work at an increased scale and to temporarily shift my attention back to the unification of the painted surface. I realized as the image began to resolve that I had the potential to create specific ‘parts paintings’ that would provide the raw material for collaged sections within this invented environment. I found that, similarly to the immediacy of watercolor, collage was teaching me *how* to make my work. It redefined how I think about the boundaries of the rectilinear canvas and the physical edges within the painting, opening up the possibility of fracturing the illusionistic space by shifting color, light, and perspective. This investigation truly opened up



opportunities within the studio, showing me that there is no mistake too great that cannot be reconstituted into a new form.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE

Indeed everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate.  
—Bachelard

The rules of linear perspective are sweet as an ideal, but within my studio practice this artificial construct limited the infinity of space that is possible within the subconscious. So most of my questioning has been both to generate mathematical linear perspective and then to subvert it. I feel most closely connected to cubist ideas about space, which focus on changing vantage points several times within one artwork.

As I began working on “Dangerous World for Soft Tissue” (Fig.1), I started to envision the physical canvas as a house that we look at from an aerial perspective: with a basement, an attic, and many rooms in-between. This lead me to cut away parts of the canvas to suspend alternate realities behind, as well as to have elements protruding or peeling away from the original surface. This perpetuated the idea of collage within the work to take on a more three dimensional out-look, or so I thought, but as per usual the work dictated a new direction that was purely based on painting. I took a photograph of one element that was suspended from the canvas and I realized that this situation that was physically occurring could exist purely within paint. So, I cut the strings that held

this particular piece to the original canvas and proceeded to paint mimetically the photographed image of the canvas suspended in perspective directly onto that original area (Fig. 7). This changed the rules of the game that the painting was playing. The physical collage informed the composition of the painted surface, with both collaged and painted elements working together to confuse the space.

This tool of three dimensional collage led me to consider pop-up books for inspiration and guidance. These books are constructed to move and change as the pages open, but they also engage with Yve-Alain Bois' Symbolic Model, which comments on "Dubuffet's twin desires 'to force the gaze to consider the painted surface as a ground viewed from above, and at the same time to erect the ground into a wall calling for man's intervention by line or imprint'"(P.134).

Compositionally, it has been a challenge to work on a large scale while at the same time negotiating these ideas about spatial relationships. Armed with the guidance of pop-up books I decided to build a diorama from watercolor drawings so that the physical space and lighting could be manipulated in a three dimensional way before the drawing would begin on the canvas (Fig. 8). This structure provided me with an armature on which to test ideas. However, the painting was not a direct translation of this diorama, it was merely a jumping off point, freeing up the possibilities of invention while within the process of the painting.

## CHAPTER V

### FULL CIRCLE

“Negotiation of Necessity” (Fig. 9)

Need to get out, need to get food

Get out where?

Mustard doesn't go bad,

Neither will those noodles.

Questioning safety in isolation:

Protection or cage? Predator or company?

The mischievous shadow,

Gave us a break in our expectations,

To allow curiosity an opportunity to try to kill him.

Setting off a chain reaction of whimsical anxiety,

Bringing to our attention that false sense of safety,

And the water starts pouring in,

But I turned it off,

That's sweetly troubling,

Considering the paper thin construction,

Where rigid becomes permeable,

But now I am starving.

What I have found is that the further my line of inquiry moves circuitously away from painting, the closer it inevitably pulls me back into a dialogue submerged within painting. At this moment, I am deeply considering supplanting the physical collage with a paint viscosity collage. What does this look like? How can this operate? How do I need to adjust my mediums to push those limits?

I had the tremendous experience of seeing artist Kerry James Marshall's exhibit at the Met Breuer and I have been thinking about the subversive way in which he installed his paintings: hung extremely close together and grommited to the wall. He is carving out his own space within the historical structure of painting and I find this very inspiring as I consider how to put my own work into a contemporary context.

As I look ahead to the future, the topic that feels full of potential is the exploration of figuration. If I am building worlds, then the figures inhabiting those spaces should be as closely considered within my invented worlds as every other element. The rules and training that I harbor around the human anatomy have been the most difficult to undermine.

During a visit to the Anthropological Museum in Mexico City I was able to observe an array of small anthropomorphic figurines from ancient civilizations. These figures felt fresh and alive because of their unfiltered immediacy and symbolic necessity, despite their prehistoric context. This experience has had the greatest impact on my thinking about figuration to date and I fully expect to revisit this source of inspiration as I move forward with figurative experimentation.

Some of my unanswered questions include: How do you show psychological weight in a figure? Is a skeleton or muscles necessary? Do I need to physically build figures for these spaces to better understand their movement and manipulation? All unanswered questions, full of potential, and ready to be considered.

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## CATALOG OF IMAGES

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Figure 2. Watercolor Drawings (assorted), watercolor on paper, dimensions variable, 2015

Figure 3. *No Thank You*, Oil on Canvas with Embroidery Floss, 14"x20", 2015

Figure 4. *Belly Lights*, Oil & Enamel on Canvas with Embroidery Floss, 54"x54", 2016

Figure 5. *Pizza/Jack*, Oil & Enamel on Canvas with Embroidery Floss, 42"x36", 2016

Figure 6. *Space Heater for Cicadas*, Oil & Enamel on Canvas with Embroidery Floss, 84"x156", 2016

Figure 7. *Dangerous World for Soft Tissue* (detail), Oil & Enamel on Canvas with Embroidery Floss, 84"x164", 2016

Figure 8. Watercolor Diorama, watercolor on paper and tape, 8"x14"x12", 2017

Figure 9. *Negotiation of Necessity*, 92"x120", Oil on Canvas, 2017





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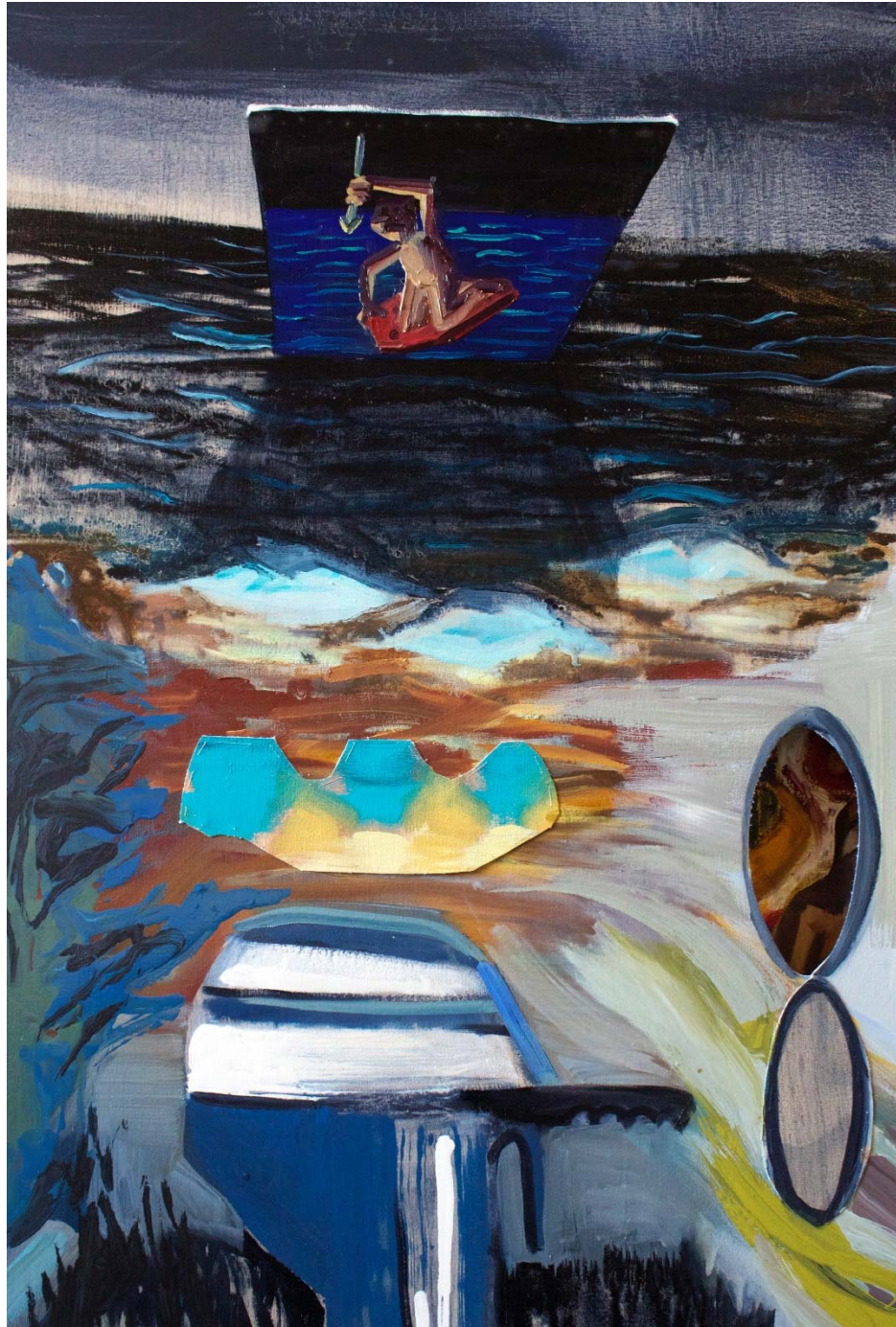


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